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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000183

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SUBJECT: MALAWI ELECTIONS UPDATE - MULUZI READY TO WAVE THE WHITE FLAG?

REF: LILONGWE 157 AND PREVIOUS

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¶1. (C) Summary: According to Muluzi confidante Harry Thomson and Malawi Congress Party (MCP) Secretary General Chris Daza, former President Bakili Muluzi is prepared to withdraw his nomination for President and support MCP candidate John Tembo if the Constitutional Court upholds the MEC ruling on Muluzi's ineligibility. With Tembo as Mutharika's main rival, the first signs of MCP tension with Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) resulted in a rock-throwing clash between two rallies that left 16 injured.

President Mutharika held his own rally, unveiling the DPP's manifesto, but his party's six new Hummers and use of government vehicles to transport party supporters drew more attention. Two polls tipped Mutharika to win the election in a landslide, including one by widely recognized research project Afrobarometer. For its part, the MEC has decided to report ballot-box-level results at all polling stations in an effort to be more transparent. MEC also finally accredited local monitors from the Malawi Electoral Support Network (MESN) who will be supported by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) through a grant from USAID. Comment: Despite poll results to the contrary, the likely withdrawal of Muluzi and probable support for Tembo should make the May election an extremely tight race. Transparent management of official results and MESN's domestic monitoring will be crucial for widespread acceptance of the electoral outcome. End Summary.

Sources: Muluzi Won't Appeal April 7 Ruling

¶2. (C) According to both Harry Thomson, United Democratic Front (UDF) National Executive Committee member, and Christopher Daza, Secretary General of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), former President Bakili Muluzi will abide by the decision of the Constitutional Court regarding his candidacy for president. The hearing is scheduled for April 7 in Blantyre. While Muluzi can legally appeal the Constitutional Court decision to the Supreme Court if it goes against him, Thomson told the Charge that it was not in Muluzi's or Malawi's best interest to prolong the debate. Thomson said that if the Constitutional Court agrees with the MEC that Muluzi is constitutionally prohibited from standing, Muluzi will withdraw his nomination.

¶3. (C) Daza told emboff that the MCP and the UDF have discussed an alliance. He said that if the April 7 court ruling is not in Muluzi's favor, Muluzi will announce that he is supporting MCP candidate John Tembo for president. Daza said the arrangement would give Muluzi time to campaign for Tembo. An appeal could add three or four additional weeks of uncertainty that would limit the effectiveness of the proposed alliance.

Media Questions Mutharika's Campaign Funds

¶4. (SBU) At the unveiling of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) manifesto, President Mutharika surprised many by arriving in a caravan that consisted of six brand new black Hummers and three new tour buses decked out in party colors. Additionally, an April 1 Voice of America report suggested that Mutharika recently asked Malawi's ambassadors abroad to help raise external funds for his campaign. Numerous media reports also have identified government vehicles being used to transport candidates and supporters to DPP campaign rallies.

Parties Clash in Lilongwe

¶5. (C) On March 29, MCP and DPP supporters clashed in Lilongwe's Mitundu constituency. MCP and DPP partisans threw stones at each other, injuring fifteen, and destroying the cab of a large truck. The incident occurred when MCP presidential candidate John Tembo and DPP MP Bintony Kutsaira held rallies simultaneously just 500 meters apart. According to Kutsaira, the dispute ensued over they use of a local troop of tribal dancers. Kutsaira told emboff that he had requested the use of the dance troop first and when MCP was rebuffed, supporters targeted his truck which was carrying the group. MCP Secretary General Chris Daza disputed the claim. Daza said the DPP drove its vehicles chanting party slogans through the MCP rally which had already begun. He said an angry MCP supporter threw a stone at the vehicle, but hit a woman which started the clash.

Polls Claim Mutharika in a Landslide

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¶6. (SBU) Public broadcaster Television Malawi (TVM) aired its third presidential election poll, which showed that President Mutharika was favored by 58% of voters compared to 30% for John Tembo. TVM did not elaborate on its methodologies, but in recent MEC media monitoring reports, TVM has devoted 98% of its positive political coverage to the Mutharika's DPP, leading many to discount its findings.

¶7. (SBU) On March 28, Afrobarometer released its fourth round survey which also included a question about political preferences. In the Afrobarometer survey, 61% favored DPP, 11% favored UDF, and only 6% favored MCP. Even within the Central region, the MCP garnered only 15% support. The MCP quickly disputed the findings, while mainstream media and DPP trumpeted a coming landslide. Dr. Blessings Chinsinga, a professor at University of Malawi who worked on the Afrobarometer study, conceded to emboff that the number is not as telling as it appears. Chinsinga said the 1200 people were surveyed in October, just as the government's fertilizer subsidy coupons were being distributed. He also said despite being told about who was performing the survey and for what reason, 67% of respondents still said they believed the government of Malawi was performing the survey. Chinsinga said the belief that government was asking about the elections combined with a pending government benefit made the survey question less useful and predictive.

MEC Reverses on Results Management System

¶8. (SBU) The MEC has apparently reversed an earlier decision to co-mingle separate ballot boxes for counting and only report one number per polling station (reftel). The MEC now plans to count each ballot box separately and list the totals for each ballot box as well as the aggregate total at each polling station. The MEC believes the new method should provide greater transparency and instill confidence in

monitors and political parties.

Local Monitors Accredited, NDI on the Ground

¶9. (C) On March 24, the MEC accredited local civil society organizations to monitor the May elections. While traditionally this has not been a problem, there is no specific provision for domestic monitoring in the electoral law. Malawi Electoral Support Network (MESN) Director Aloisius Nthenda previously told emboff he was fearful that their application for accreditation would be refused as a result of the fallout from the dispute over its proposed parallel vote tally.

¶10. (C) In a March 23 meeting with Chief Secretary Bright Msaka, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) cleared the air on their plans to assist MESN with domestic election monitoring. NDI stressed that its efforts would complement the efforts of the MEC to hold free, fair, and credible elections by limiting the ability of candidates and media to claim vote rigging. Msaka agreed that NDI and MESN's plan was legal, and said the GOM welcomed NDI's involvement in the elections. After finalizing its initial funding through a grant from USAID, NDI's team arrived in Malawi on April 3 to begin working with MESN. MESN is still seeking an additional \$50,000 USD to fund essential polling day monitoring expenses.

Transparent Results and Effective Monitoring Crucial

¶11. (C) Comment: The Constitutional Court is expected to uphold the MEC's decision to rule Muluzi ineligible. If it does, Muluzi appears ready to throw his full support behind Tembo. Regardless of the polls, Tembo, with Muluzi's support, will be a formidable challenger to the President. Moreover, multiple sources indicate that Muluzi and the UDF receive campaign financing from South Africa, Libya, the Middle East, and the UK. Muluzi's financial resources could help level the playing field between Tembo and Mutharika. With a tight election expected, MEC's results management system and the NDI-MESN domestic observation efforts will be crucial to widespread and peaceful acceptance of the results.

End Comment.

SULLIVAN